

HOW TO... Use Excel faster

It's easy to waste hours in Excel trying to get to grips with its many features. Jennifer Bagley explains how you can improve your spreadsheet speed

Excel is an incredibly powerful program that makes it easy to deal with huge amounts of data. But it is has so many tools and features that sometimes just a few actions can take forever. Here, we show you a selection of Excel short cuts that reduce the time it takes to perform many of the common actions you'll undertake while using a spreadsheet.

Most of these short cuts use keys instead of mouse clicks. Keyboard short cuts are a sequence of keys that you press simultaneously to get Excel to perform an action or command. They're faster than using a mouse because you don't need to move your hands from the keyboard to use them. For example, by pressing Ctrl and N together (Ctrl-N) you open a new workbook.

Many commands in Excel have a keyboard equivalent and these are often noted next to the command in its menu. Click on the Edit menu and you'll see that to copy selected items you just press Ctrl-C. Once you have memorised a few of these, using them will be second nature.

We used Excel 2003 for this walkthrough, but these tips should work in earlier versions as well.

1 Excel doesn't display the formula you enter in a cell, only the results of that formula. So if you enter =1+1 in a cell, it will display 2. However, there are times when it can be helpful to see the formula. One way to do this is to click on the cell; the formula appears in the Formula bar at the top of the screen. This is not so useful if you want to see more than one formula, or if you want to display all the formulae in a worksheet. The long way of doing this is to go to the Tools menu and select

Options and then tick the Formulas box on the View tab. However, a much faster way is to press Ctrl and ` (to the left of 1) simultaneously. Press those two keys again to return the worksheet to normal.

2 When you enter text into a cell, AutoFill helpfully makes suggestions based on what else has been entered in that column. This is a great timesaver, especially if it is important that words or phrases match, which might be the case if you're using filters. For example, you may not remember if you have listed a particular staff member as Tony or Anthony. To see the entries in a column quickly without having to scroll back up the page, right-click and select Pick from Drop-down list. To do the same thing even faster, simply press Alt and the down arrow key.

3 The right-click menu in Excel is a big timesaver. Right-click on a cell and you can pick Format Cells, so there's no need to move the mouse around the screen to select menus. The right-click menu varies according to what you're doing. Quite often, you'll need to copy the contents of a cell to adjacent cells. Sometimes you need to copy just the contents; other times you must copy the formatting. Using the Fill handle, the small square on the bottom-right of a selected cell, will copy both. But if you right-click on the Fill handle and drag the cells across, a menu appears with these options.

4 The right-click menu on the Fill handle has some other handy uses. If the cells you are copying across contain the words 'Monday,

Tuesday' then Excel will recognise that you're filling in days of the week and will automatically continue with Wednesday, Thursday and so on. Right-clicking when you drag the Fill handle across will give you the option to just select workdays; that is, you get just Monday to Friday and skip the weekends.

5 You can quickly select an entire row in one of two ways. First, you can click on the number tile at the row's far left-hand side. However, if the cell already selected onscreen is in the row you want to highlight, it is even easier to press Shift and the space bar. To select only cells on the row to the right of the cell you're currently in, press Ctrl, Shift and the right arrow key, or the left arrow key to go the other way. Pressing the key combination once takes you to the end of the cells containing data. Press the arrow key a second time, while still holding down the Ctrl and Shift keys, to go right to the end of the row. To select cells across the row one at a time, hold the Shift key down and press the right or left arrow key. The same combination can be used for columns, but with the up or down arrow keys.

6 Often a workbook will contain a number of worksheets, and you may need to move from one worksheet to another and back again. A quick keyboard short cut to move between worksheets involves holding down the Ctrl key and pressing the Page Down key to move forward or the Page Up key to move back. Hold down the Shift key at the same time to select multiple worksheets. **CS**

